

Embodied and Situated Cognition: from Phenomenology to Neuroscience and Artificial Intelligence

EMBODIMENT, CONSCIOUSNESS AND TIME

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Common among enactivists is the rejection of claims supporting language-like mental representations: that the brain constructs inner "sentences" with content, reference, and truth conditions. If one holds such a theory one can treat human cognition as an extension of philosophy of language.

A related view holds that mental representations are a kind of "mental object," which the subject can internally perceive. A typical statement from the early 80's might go:

When we believe that P, what happens is that a token representation of P is put into the belief box. When we desire that Q, the token goes into the desire box.

(Anon., overheard)

The idea of mental entities being put into propositional attitude "boxes" by some kind of central processor is obviously ludicrous. But as Dan Hutto points out, the view that there are mental "objects" that the subject can observe is retained in theories of consciousness, creating many well-known puzzles about how subjective and objective can interact, is an offspring of the philosophy of language approach, and is still widely held.

It is important to get rid of misleading conceptual frameworks. But if they are, as Hutto and many others have noted, deep-rooted, then it is also important to understand how they got to be that way, and why it is so hard to root them out..

This paper treats the object-centered framework as a significant datum in its own right, and argues that it may be so deep-rooted as to have influenced the evolution of the brain. Like frogs who respond only to moving black specks, we respond, or reason, only in terms of objects existing in a spatiotemporal environment. Like the frog, we respond to stimuli by attempting to interact with objects. Unlike the frog, we are complex and clever enough to build conceptual edifices upon this built-in response, and our theories of mind reflect that tendency.

Simply put: we are unable to think except in terms of object-like entities moving in spatiotemporal-like environments. If this generalization is even partially true, it is vital evidence for a theory of consciousness, which must not be tossed away.

I propose a radical idea about how our object-centered conceptual frameworks might have played a role in phenomenal consciousness. I will argue that the phenomenal object of all conscious experience is object interaction in spacetime, and that the weirdness of consciousness is simply the result of trying to pack temporally-extended experiences into each single moment of perception; into what is happening "NOW." The best analogy for my claim about time is the phenomenon of depth perception, a trick of the brain that lets us think we are seeing into spatial depth.

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The argument is supported by some recent empirical work, but much more is needed. On the other hand, it may be that some of the work has been done, and the evidence is simply awaiting interpretation. I am hoping to put us in a frame of mind for noticing it.